Chapter 71: Festering Malice ②

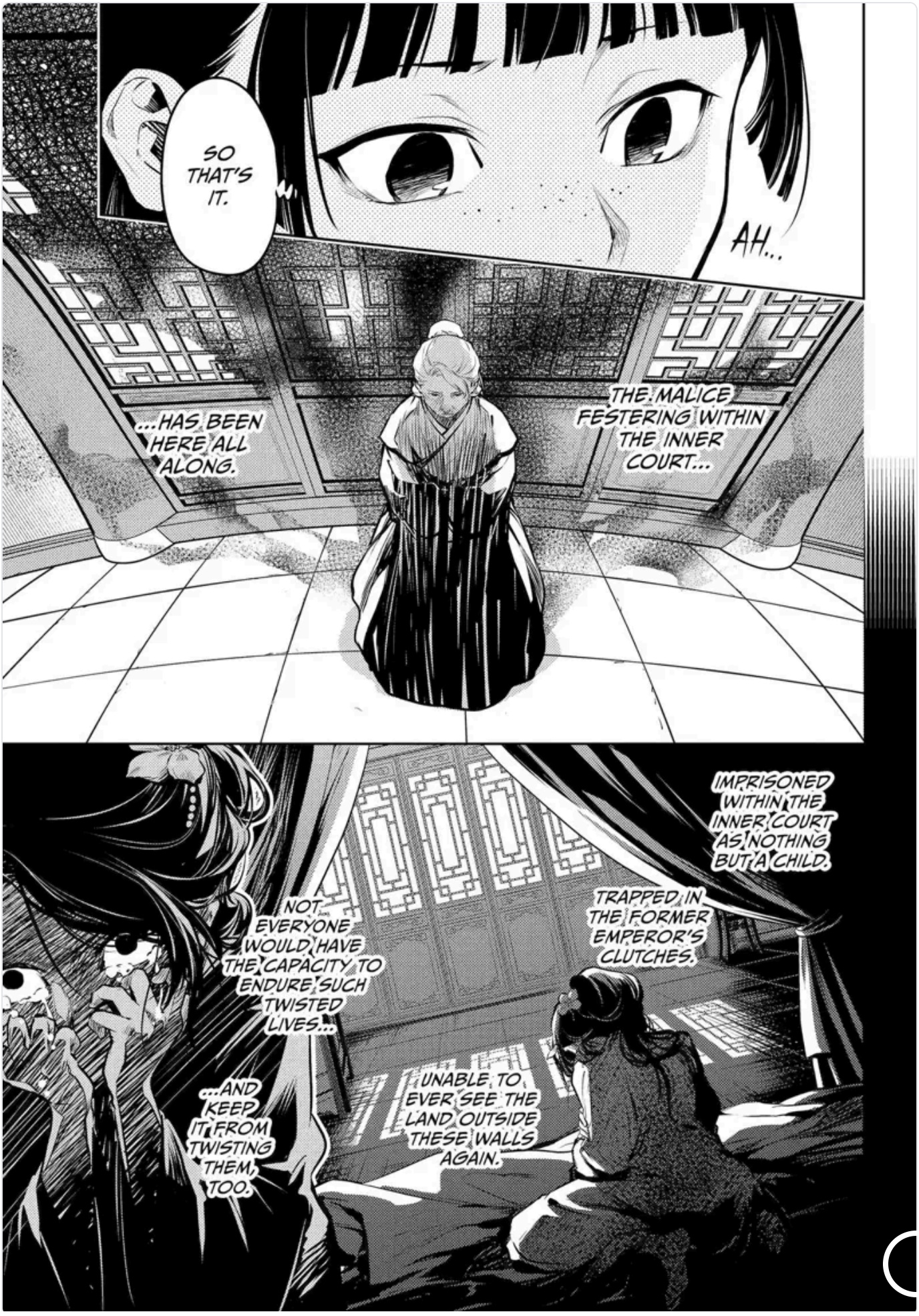
JOLT
ARE YOU FEELING UNWELL?
UM!
OH, NOW THERE'S A FAMILIAR FACE.
I REMEMBERED THAT YOU USE ALCOHOL AS DISINFECTANT HERE.
I THOUGHT THAT DISTILLED ALCOHOL MIGHT BE BETTER FOR THAT, SO...
...I BROUGHT SOME WITH ME.
LET ME GO ASK.
SNFF
SNFF
HMM.
GOOD THING I HAD THE ALCOHOL ON ME ALREADY. IT WORKS AS AN EXCUSE.

GRRRK...
THAT'S THE NO-NONSENSE LADY-IN-WAITING I MET HERE BEFORE.
HER NAME WAS... SHENLÜ.
WE WOULD BE ABLE TO GET A LOT OF USE OUT OF THIS.
MAY WE?
I DISTILLED A GOOD AMOUNT. I CAN BRING MORE IF YOU'D LIKE.
YES.
PLEASE, THANK YOU.
BOW...

HMMM...
I NEED TO BROACH THE TOPIC AS NATURALLY AS I CAN MANAGE.
ACTING ISN'T MY STRONG SUIT.
NO, IT'S JUST THAT...
...YOU'VE ALL BEEN HERE MUCH LONGER THAN THE TWO-YEAR PERIOD OF INDENTURE-SHIP.
THAT'S WHAT STUCK OUT TO ME.
I WANTED TO MENTION, THE LADIES-IN-WAITING HERE ARE ALL QUITE REMARKABLE.
WHERE'S... THAT COMING FROM?
OF COURSE THAT WAS A STRANGE THING TO SAY.
TRUE.
NOTHING BUT OLD MAIDS HERE.

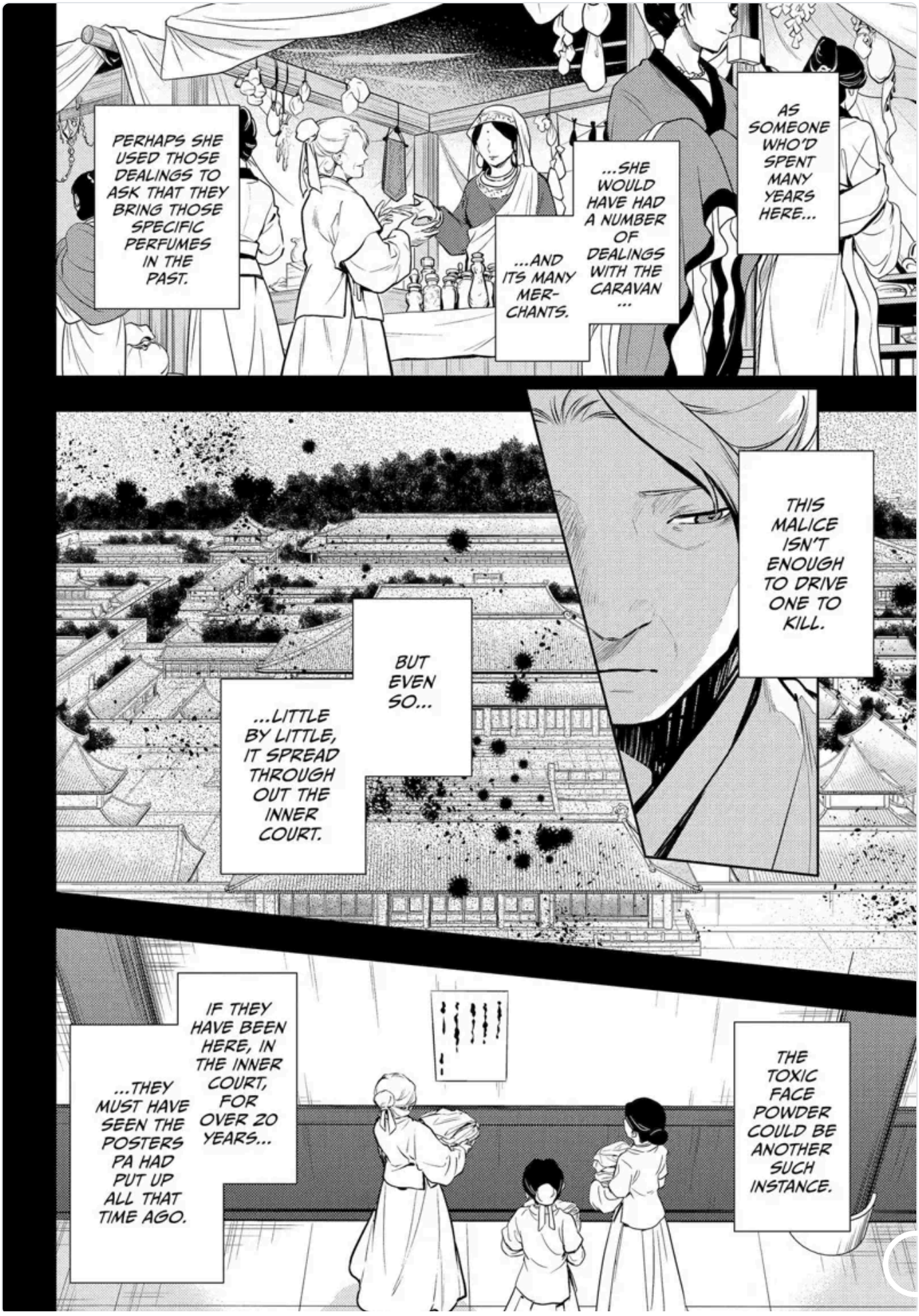
NONE OF US WERE MUCH OLDER THAN TEN YEARS OLD.
...WE WERE ALL QUITE YOUNG WHEN WE FIRST CAME TO THE INNER COURT.
STILL...
RIGHT NOW, YOU HAVE TO BE AT LEAST 14 YEARS OLD TO BE ELIGIBLE TO ENTER THE INNER COURT.
GIVEN THEY MUST'VE COME HERE WELL OVER 20 YEARS AGO...
AND NOT ONCE IN ALL THAT TIME WERE WE ABLE TO LEAVE.
NOBODY CAME FOR US.
...MOST OF THE CLINIC'S LADIES-IN-WAITING HAD TO HAVE COME HERE DURING THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR'S REIGN.

IT ISN'T FOR ME TO SAY...
..."AT LEAST THEY'RE STILL ALIVE."
THE EMPRESS DOWAGER ESTABLISHING THIS CLINIC ...
...IS SOMETHING I HAD SEEN AS NOT UNLIKE ADVISING THE EMPEROR TO ABOLISH SLAVERY AND CEASING THE PRODUCTION OF EUNUCHS.
AN ACT OF PURE, SELFLESS KINDNESS. BUT PERHAPS NOT.
ANY LADY-IN-WAITING THE EMPEROR TAKES AS A MISTRESS ISN'T ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE INNER COURT.
THERE ARE TIMES THEY MAY BE GIVEN AWAY TO VASSALS, OR MARRIED OFF TO OTHER COUNTRIES...
...BUT ONLY IF THEY'RE OF HIGH ENOUGH STATUS.
IN AGES PAST, THEY WOULD'VE BEEN MADE TO FOLLOW THEIR EMPEROR INTO THE AFTERLIFE.


SO THAT'S IT.
AH...
...HAS BEEN HERE ALL ALONG.
THE MALICE FESTERING WITHIN THE INNER COURT...
IMPRISONED WITHIN THE INNER COURT AS NOTHING BUT A CHILD.
TRAPPED IN THE FORMER EMPEROR'S CLUTCHES.
NOT EVERYONE WOULD HAVE THE CAPACITY TO ENDURE SUCH TWISTED LIVES...
...AND KEEP IT FROM TWISTING THEM, TOO.
UNABLE TO EVER SEE THE LAND OUTSIDE THESE WALLS AGAIN.

THEY'D COME TO DESPISE THE INNER COURT.
DESPISE THOSE THE EMPEROR SHARES HIS FAVOR WITH.
...THE INCIDENT IN THE CRYSTAL PALACE TAKES ON AN ENTIRELY NEW LIGHT.
AND IF SHENLÜ HOLDS THOSE SAME FEELINGS...

LEAVE THIS ON THE HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING'S DESK, THAT SHE MIGHT TAKE PROPER CARE OF HER DEAR CONSORT.
OR SOME THING LIKE THAT.
SO SHE WROTE DOWN A LIST OF THINGS PREGNANT WOMEN OUGHT TO AVOID TO GIVE TO THE MAID.
FROM SPEAKING WITH HER, SHENLÜ MAY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DEDUCE THAT CONSORT LIHUA WAS WITH CHILD. AND ON BAD TERMS WITH XING.
SHENLÜ KNEW THE MAID THAT HAD FALLEN ILL IN THE CRYSTAL PALACE.
AT FIRST BLUSH, A SIMPLE FAVOR...
...BUT IF SHE KNEW XING HELD CONTEMPT FOR CONSORT LIHUA...
...IT MAY HAVE BEEN TO ENCOURAGE XING.
別用含鉛或水銀之白粉
用以下香料
安息香
桂皮
青桐
乳香
SHE DELIBERATELY INFORMED SOMEONE WITH NO LOVE FOR A CONSORT OF WHAT WOULD BE POISONOUS.
AND IF SHE COULD GET HER HANDS ON THE NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FROM THE CARAVAN'S TIMELY ARRIVAL...
...XING COULD MAKE USE OF THAT INFOR-MATION.


AS SOMEONE WHO'D SPENT MANY YEARS HERE...
...SHE WOULD HAVE HAD A NUMBER OF DEALINGS WITH THE CARAVAN ...
...AND ITS MANY MER-CHANTS.
PERHAPS SHE USED THOSE DEALINGS TO ASK THAT THEY BRING THOSE SPECIFIC PERFUMES IN THE PAST.
THIS MALICE ISN'T ENOUGH TO DRIVE ONE TO KILL.
BUT EVEN SO...
...LITTLE BY LITTLE, IT SPREAD THROUGH OUT THE INNER COURT.
THE TOXIC FACE POWDER COULD BE ANOTHER SUCH INSTANCE.
IF THEY HAVE BEEN HERE, IN THE INNER COURT, FOR OVER 20 YEARS...
...THEY MUST HAVE SEEN THE POSTERS PA HAD PUT UP ALL THAT TIME AGO.

I COULD PRESS THIS ISSUE AND QUESTION FURTHER ...
...BUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THEM IF I DID?
AND, AS A MATTER OF FACT, THIS VERY ROOM HAS BOOK-CASES.
I KNOW AT LEAST SOME OF THE WOMEN HERE ARE LITERATE.
I DON'T HAVE ANY PROOF, OR EVEN ANYONE'S WORD.
I WOULDN'T WANT THE CLINIC TO GO UP IN SMOKE FOR NOTHING CONCRETE.
BUT THIS MALICE ISN'T GOING TO STOP FESTERING ANY TIME SOON.
IT'S SIMPLY OUT OF MY CONTROL.

I'M NOT SMART ENOUGH TO COME UP WITH ANYTHING BETTER.
WELL, THEN.
THE ONLY THING I KNOW THAT I CAN DO...
...IS KEEP THIS MALICE FROM AFFECTING THOSE AROUND ME.
JUST BE SURE TO RETURN THEM.
IF THE BOOKS HAVE CAUGHT YOUR EYE, YOU'RE WELCOME TO BORROW SOME.
PEEK
JUDGING FROM THEIR COLLECTION, THEY MUST GET SIZABLE STIPENDS.
HMM...
WELL IF YOU SAY THAT, IT'D PROBABLY BE RUDE TO LEAVE WITHOUT A CURSORY ONCE-OVER.
SWSH

IMAGINE HAVING SO MANY BOOKS TO SPARE.
UNNEEDED BOOKS THAT WERE ONLY IN THE WAY, MAYBE?
I COULD SWEAR BOOKS JUST APPEAR FROM THIN AIR SOMETIMES.
IT'S SO ODD. SOME SEEM TO DO MORE THAN JUST RETURN THEM.
HM? WHAT'S THIS?
GUIDES ON HOW A CHASTE WIFE CONDUCTS HERSELF, AND OTHER SUCH DULL TEXTS.
I COULD SEE LADIES-IN-WAITING FROM WEALTHY FAMILIES LEAVING THESE.
THIS IS DEFINITELY THE KIND OF THING SHISUI WOULD LIKE.
OF INSECTS, AT THAT.
ILLUS-TRATIONS?
FLIP

THIS... IS THE MOTH WE GATHERED FOR THE ENVOYS' BANQUET.
IS THIS THE BOOK SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT?
SHISUI DID MENTION SEEING IT ILLUSTRATED IN A BOOK BEFORE.
SO IF IT WASN'T HERE THEN...
...IT SEEMS FAIR TO ASSUME IT WAS, IN FACT, SHISUI WHO HAD IT.
ABOUT A MONTH AGO WOULD BE WELL AFTER THE DATE OF THE BANQUET.
THAT ONE, TOO. I REMEMBER IT POPPING UP HERE ABOUT A MONTH AGO.

IS SHISUI THE DAUGHTER OF A WEALTHY FAMILY?
SHE CAN READ AND WRITE, BUT HER JOB IS MANAGING LAUNDRY. BECAUSE OF HER PROBLEMATIC PERSONALITY, MAYBE?
...WAS MADE FROM SNACK WRAPPING PAPER.
IN FACT, THINKING BACK, THE NOTEBOOK SHE USED FOR HER DRAWINGS...
ANOTHER ITEM THAT WOULD BE RARE HERE IN THE INNER COURT, ESPECIALLY IN SUCH ABUNDANCE.
BUT SUCH A THICK BOOK WOULD HAVE TO BE VERY EXPENSIVE.
NOT SOMETHING ANY GIVEN LADY-IN-WAITING COULD AFFORD.
カリ
BUT...
CLACK

YOU OUGHT TO BE MORE CAREFUL.
WHAT'S GOING ON?!
SUIREI ?!